

The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Artists constantly have to make their own way. It is one of the most competitive businesses imaginable. For this reason, actors have created their own work whenever necessary to feed their souls and keep their skills sharp. I, along with Laura Girard, have created a dance show that allowed us to perform some of our favorite movie musical dance numbers. The movies *White Christmas* (1954), *Gypsy* (1962), *The Band Wagon* (1953), *La La Land* (2016), and the stage musical *A Chorus Line* (1975) all contain beautiful dance numbers that exemplify the joy of a performer's struggles. Creating this show was a labor of love, and it taught us a great deal about how to manage both the technical and emotional aspects of becoming professional actors.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Christie Zimmerman for advising me through this project. She has been a mentor and friend these past four years and I will be forever grateful for her guidance. I would like to thank our lighting designer, Amanda Boldt, our sound designer, Burton Fisher, our videographer, Nick Murhling, and our production manager, Colleen Tovar.

I would like to thank Maryelizabeth, James, and Reagan for encouraging me every step of the way. I would also like to thank Laura, without whom this literally would not exist.

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Process Analysis Statement

This thesis taught me a lot about myself as an artist. Laura Girard and I worked on creating this show for over two months. As musical theatre majors, we knew a creative project would be the most fulfilling medium for an honors thesis. We initially considered putting together a full production of a musical. However, we came to the conclusion that creating our own unique piece of work would be very beneficial as we end four years of theatre training. The hardest part about going into the world will be finding work. Acting is an incredibly competitive business. Some of the most successful actors create their own work in cities all over the country. *The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing* was an experiment in creating a fully realized show from the ground up. We made our own rehearsal schedule, played multiple roles (including performers, choreographers, and dramaturgs), and worked one-on-one with our designers. Creating this show acted as proof that Laura and I are capable artists who can make our own work in the years ahead.

One of the most difficult parts of this thesis was creating a set list for the show. Laura and I are both very passionate about musical theatre, and golden age shows in particular. We started out picking over 50 iconic movie musical dance numbers. These spanned movie musicals from as early as the 1950s to as recent as 2016. We both knew we wanted to pay homage to a variety of choreographers and dancers. Narrowing down the dance numbers was what made this a tricky part of the process! Laura has an eye for the intricacies of different choreographers, and I have an eye for cabaret-style arrangement. Putting our heads together, we were able to select five numbers from different decades, all of which showcased choreography we were passionate about. We ended up choosing "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing", "All I Need Is the Girl", "Dancing in the Dark", "The Music and the Mirror", and "A Lovely Night".

Once we had finalized our set list, we made a rehearsal schedule. This is typically out of an actor's hands. Acting as our own stage managers, we planned out weekly rehearsals for the two months leading up to the performance. We made sure to take into account the many factors of a rehearsal period, including our conflicting schedules, school, and part-time jobs. Normally this arrangement would be handled through a detailed conflict sheet, but we were able to create an airtight schedule together. We communicated with our production manager, Colleen Tovar, and rented a rehearsal space for the rest of the semester. We also reserved Korsgaard Dance Studio for April 22, 2017 from 4:00-11:00 PM, knowing we would perform our show at 7:30 PM. Sticking to this rehearsal schedule was difficult due to several time-consuming senior events, such as our Cole Porter cabaret with Sutton Foster in March of 2017. That being said, we both were diligent about showing up to rehearsal prepared and excited for a long day's work. We had to cancel or reschedule a couple rehearsals, but never to the point of detriment. This aspect of our process was excellent practice for an artist's time-management in the professional world.

With the foundations for our show in place, we started advertising. Selling a show has become so much easier with the rise of social media. We created a Facebook event for our show. This was a very convenient way to invite our professors and colleagues. As we drew closer to the event, we put out weekly announcements for the show at meetings for Alpha Psi Omega, which is a theatre service fraternity. Until now, neither of us had truly appreciated the effort that goes into advertising an event.

The majority of our efforts went into a long rehearsal process. Before each rehearsal, we watched the original dances together on YouTube and highlighted any choreography we would have to adapt for the stage. We began rehearsing "A Lovely Night" first, since we had both just seen *La La Land* and wanted something accessible to excite us about the work ahead. We then

learned the rest of the numbers piecemeal, often learning part of one dance and leaving it to learn part of another. Looking back, this was not the most efficient way to learn the show. While it did often give us a change of pace, it was difficult to add new choreography to a dance we had known only half of for the past few weeks. We have learned that attacking big dance numbers in smaller parts is helpful, but it is detrimental to try leaving a dance number before it is finished! Most of our rehearsals were in three-hour blocks on Friday afternoons. This gave us incentive to focus and finish our rehearsals strong going into the weekend. We would often film our rehearsals on an iPad so we could critique ourselves and improve the dance over time.

Three weeks before the performance, we contacted our sound designer, Burton Fisher. We communicated our specific needs for the show, and he was able to compile all the edited sound files necessary for the final product. We knew we were going to be addressing the audience between numbers, and Burton made sure all of our sound cues were timed perfectly. Once we had our sound ready to go, we met with our lighting designer, Amanda Boldt. She was able to help us create a lighting plot that subtly set the mood for each dance number. We also contacted our videographer, Nick Murhling, who captured the entire thesis performance on film.

A week before the show, we designed the program. We wanted to have something simple and elegant. After all, we did not want to give away any surprises about the dances coming up! We included the important information (title of show, date, location, acknowledgements, etc.). We decided on a silhouette of a waltzing couple in the background was a nice touch. We also made our simple Google Slides presentation during this time. We felt a slideshow would give the audience some context for our dances, and it also gave the show smooth transitions. After we had given the audience some context, the slide would act as a backdrop for our dance.

On the day of the show, we entered Korsgaard Dance Studio at 4:00 PM and prepared the space. We took out the bleachers, moved barres to the backstage area, and placed our set pieces on the floor. We began a short tech with Amanda, who was able to work out the lighting plot in less than an hour! We also tested sound levels using the sound files Burton had given us. After all this was set up, we had a short cue-to-cue rehearsal, and then a full dress rehearsal with all technical aspects in place. With only a few expected hiccups, we got through and were ready to perform! Our videographer set up his camera, ready to film our show. Laura and I warmed up our physical instruments and eagerly awaited the audience.

Our first number was "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing" from 1954's *White Christmas*. In the number, an aspiring performer, Phil Davis, dances with a beautiful new friend, Judy. This dance was one of the easiest to learn, and it was a wonderful opener for our show. The movement style was light and carefree, and it meant a lot to us as young actors trying to find joy in our work. In this piece, my biggest concern was moving with grace. Over the past four years, I have worked a lot with professors in both the acting and dance departments in order to release tension from my body. I tend to hold a lot of tension in my shoulders in particular. Laura was an excellent dance partner, and she made sure to remind me of moments in the dance where I could move with more efficiency in the space. This dance also reminded me to keep *just enough* tension in my body when engaging in moments of pedestrian movement. It can be easy to saunter through those moments lazily and tighten up during more technically difficult moments. It never hurts to be reminded that the best performances always come from a place of grounded, steady breath. This informs precise and graceful movement.

The second number in the show was "All I Need Is the Girl" from 1962's *Gypsy*. The song tells the story of a young chorus dancer named Tulsa who is dreaming of his solo

vaudeville debut. This piece was my solo number, and it was a struggle not putting too much weight on my performance. The song was an excellent marriage of my training as a dancer and singing actor. So rarely do musical theatre performers get to try their hand in all three conventions of the art form. I myself have never gotten to dance extensively in any show during my time at Ball State University. This number was a downright fun learning opportunity for me. I had to learn the majority of the choreography myself, but Laura was able to help me with technically challenging dance moves. This dance also helped me work on my stamina as a performer. I have always worked to keep my body strong, and this practical application (literally) worked muscles I did not know I had. Working with my physical instrument in a show, especially one of my own making, was entirely different than any class I have taken here. I was so thankful for this opportunity. In a way, the song took on a special sort of meta meaning for me. This was my debut as a future dancer. One of the more difficult parts of this number was maintaining the through line. Of course, the dancing was its own undertaking. It was made even more difficult that the song required a great deal of storytelling throughout. It was a lovely synthesis of the varied training I received these past four years.

Our third number was "Dancing in the Dark" from 1953's *The Band Wagon*. The show tells the story of an accomplished musical star who clashes with a young prima ballerina as they are put together in a Broadway show. The dance is a tense, romantic partnering that is one of the best in movie musical history. This dance was certainly the most daunting challenge of all the numbers in the show. It required just as much stamina as my solo number, and listening to my partner was key. The dance also included a number of lifts, which tested my strength and partnering skills in a way I had not dealt with before. I often became frustrated to no end, and Laura was able to guide me through the intricate details of successful lifts. I had to rely on both

my dance training and weight sharing techniques I had learned in my movement classes. The dance was also a useful exercise in partnering with the music. Having to punctuate musical accents with only my body was thrilling and brought attention to how my physical instrument can tell a compelling story. Despite the fun and triumph, the piece was still a slog at many points in the process. The musical accents were often accompanied by frequent directional changes, which tested my technical prowess. This was another example of a moment where I needed to relax into the movement. Tensing up at any point was not helpful at all. Christie guided me through my partnering and showed me how the placement of my arms was affecting my ability to move Laura around the floor. This realization was key. I was able to move with more fluidity, even in moments of intense physical exertion. Laura and I would often become frustrated with each other while learning this piece. It became easy to blame each other for mistakes made during rehearsal. In the end, we were able to put our stress aside and finally perform with joy!

The fourth number was “The Music and the Mirror” from 1975’s *A Chorus Line*. This was Laura’s solo. I can honestly say that I did not do too much to help her with this one – she is an incredible trained dancer.

Our fifth and final number was one of the most fun ones to perform. We danced “A Lovely Night” from 2016’s *La La Land*. The movie is about two star-crossed lovers who desperately try to make their relationship work despite being struggling artists. The dance number is the first sparks of chemistry between the two leads, Sebastian and Mia. Learning the choreography was not as difficult for this one since it contains a lot of pedestrian movement. It was fitting to perform this last, because the dance and source material made several references to classic movie musicals, including *Singin’ in the Rain*, *Funny Face*, and *The Band Wagon*. This piece was the perfect way to end our show commenting on the longevity of the choreography of

classic movie musicals. This was the only number in the show where a set piece was used as part of the dance. I had to jump from a sitting position to standing atop a bench, which took quite a bit of practice. Tap dance was an important element of the choreography. We were lucky that we had both been taking a tap dance class this semester! Both of our solo numbers had plenty of singing, but “A Lovely Night” had the longest duet in the show. The beautiful night sky and street lamps were reminiscent of the locale of *Dancing in the Dark*. It was refreshing to work on a section of the show that had contemporary themes and subject matter.

This show taught me a lot about myself as a performer. I had never gotten to perform such difficult dances in this capacity during my four years at Ball State University. I am thankful that both Christie and Laura had so much faith in my abilities. As I prepare to enter the professional world of performing, I am going to have to rely on my own facilities more than ever before. This project allowed me to trust in my training and realize that I do in fact have talents as a dancer. I had a fearful relationship with dance for most of my college experience. I had come here in 2013 with no technical dance training. I am confident that I can still keep working to bring my dance artistry to new heights. Beyond this, a show has so many moving parts of which I was only partially aware. Acting as our own designers and stage managers took an incredible amount of discipline throughout the process. Putting this show together with Laura tested my limits in many ways. We both know we are capable of creating our own work in the world, which is an incredible asset for any young artist. I learned that in dance, as in anything, breath is magic. This thesis truly has proved for me that the best things happen while you dance.

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Appendix A

Program

The Best Things Happen
While You're Dancing

An Honors Thesis presented by:
Laura Girard & Shea Pender

April 22, 2017
7:30 PM
Korsgaard Dance Studio
Ball State University

Special Thanks to:
Christie Zimmerman

Colleen Tovar

Burton Fisher

Amanda Boldt

Nick Murhling

The Honors College

The Department of Theatre & Dance

Appendix B

Facebook Event

APR
22

The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing

Public · Hosted by Shea Pender and Laura Girard

✓ Going ▾

...

Saturday, April 22 at 7:30 PM - 8:30 PM
about 1 week ago

Ball Gym

Ball Gymnasium, Muncie, Indiana 47303

Show Map

About

Discussion

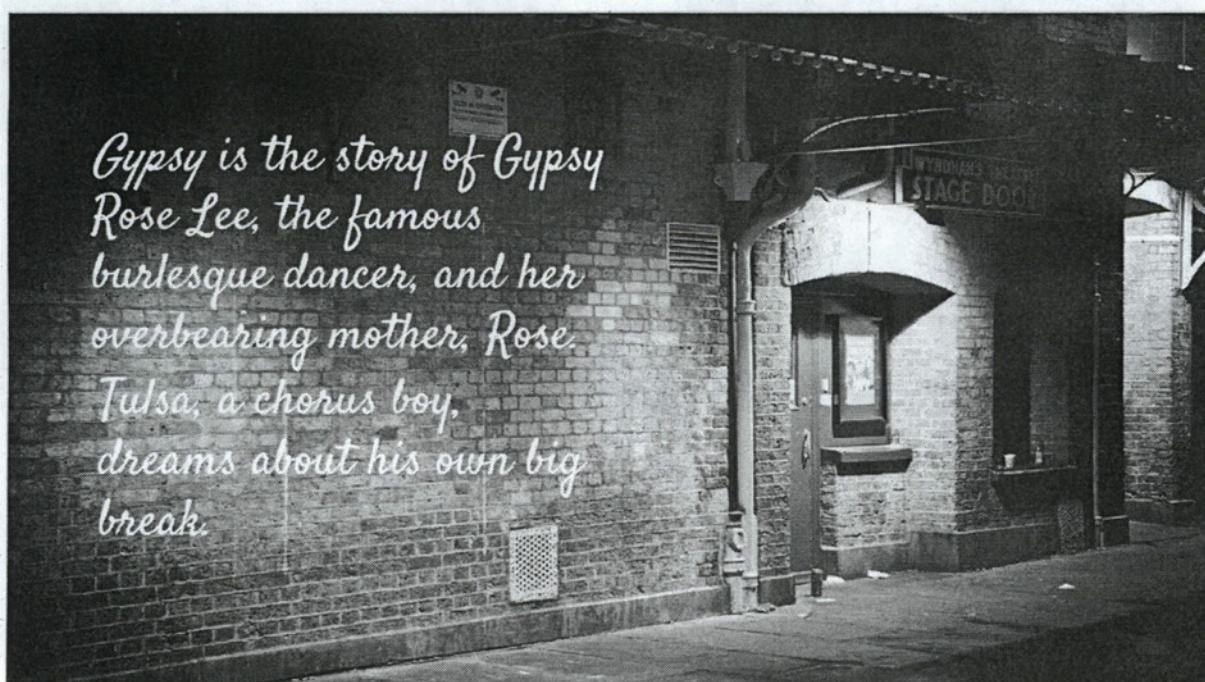
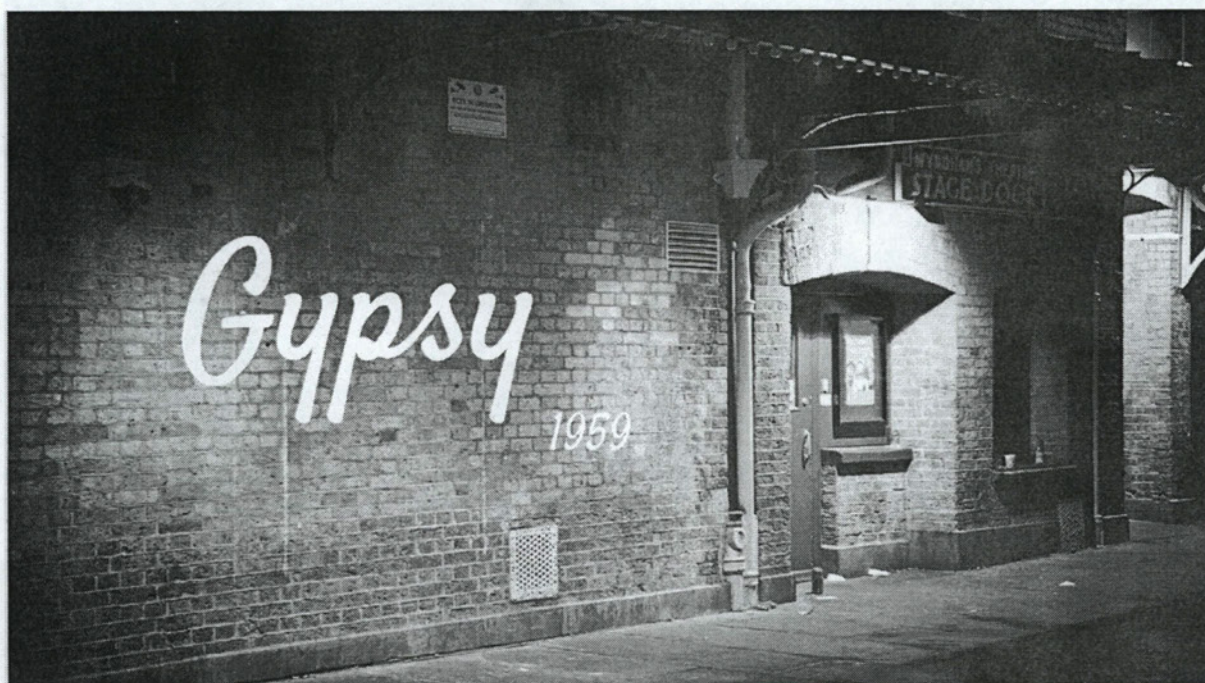
Details

We are pleased to welcome you to a fun, relaxed evening of dance! Come to KDS and enjoy our Honors Thesis (we won't get too sappy, we promise)!

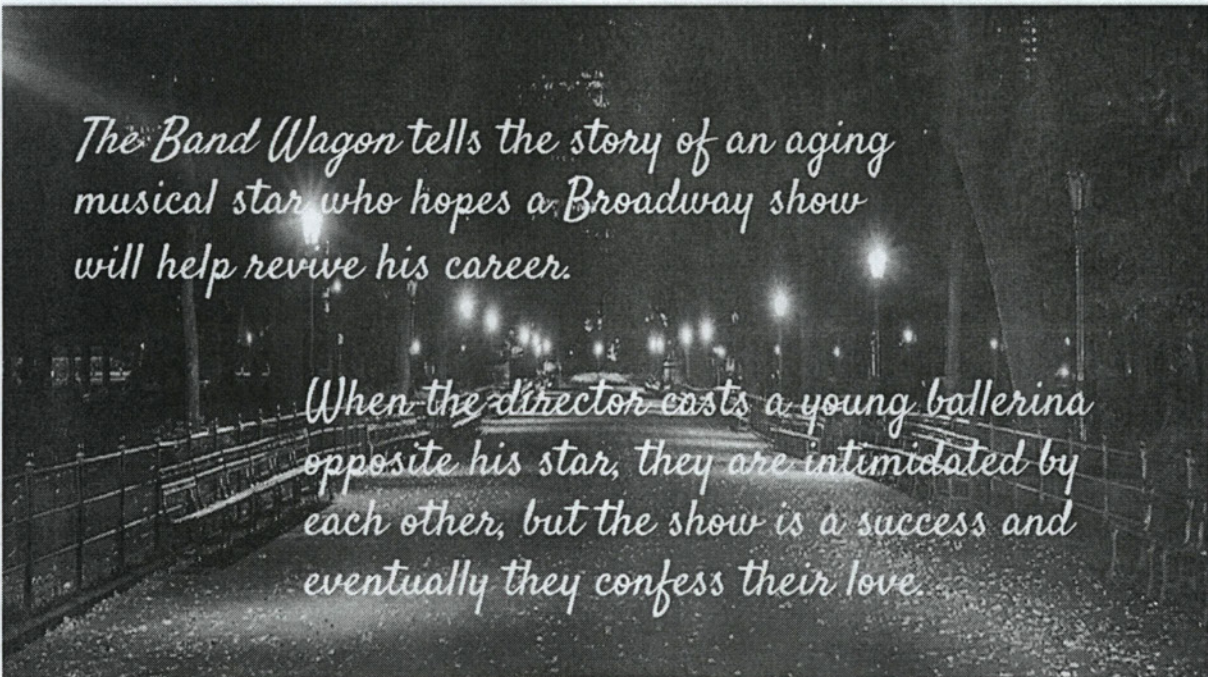
Appendix C

Google Slides










The Band Wagon tells the story of an aging musical star who hopes a Broadway show will help revive his career.

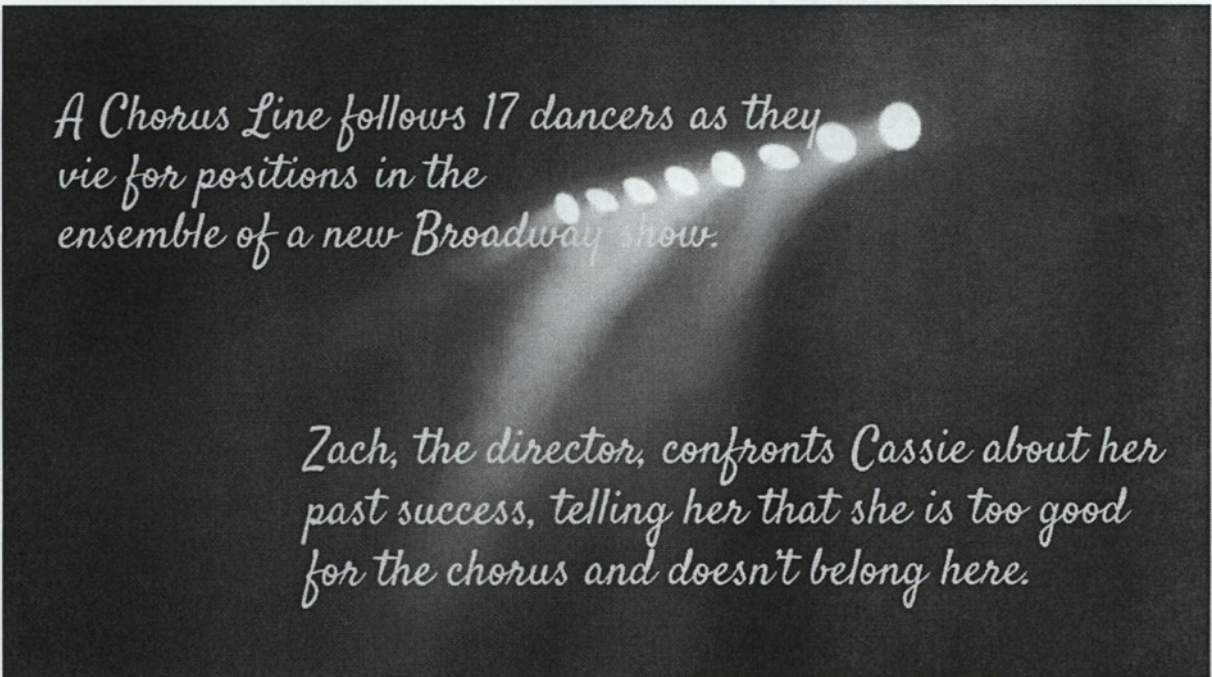
When the director casts a young ballerina opposite his star, they are intimidated by each other, but the show is a success and eventually they confess their love.





A Chorus Line

1975



A Chorus Line follows 17 dancers as they vie for positions in the ensemble of a new Broadway show.

Zach, the director, confronts Cassie about her past success, telling her that she is too good for the chorus and doesn't belong here.



La La Land

2016





Appendix D

Link to Full Performance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZboSCj1fEao&feature=youtu.be>

